

# Rechecking Our Knowledge of the Dhamma

*Bhikkhu Dhammavihari*

A good day and welcome to all of you to this dhamma assembly on this Poya day. Those of you who heard me on the last full moon day in February or read the text of that sermon in print two weeks' later would appreciate that I both insist on and count upon immediate action on what I propose and put forward as Buddhist lines of action rather on pious listening in and loud acclamation. In fact, it is a sad fact that we have to admit that in many regions of religious thinking, religious fundamentalism has become the need of the day, owing a great deal to the slackness and apathy in the implementation of the basic social needs sponsored by some of the more socially conscious religious movements of the world. We are indeed prepared to agree with everybody else that no reforms are good reforms if they in any way do violence to the spirit in which they are sponsored for the good of humanity as a whole.

With the vastness of the dhamma you would have heard up to date, and that with incredible proliferation through tapes, video--cassettes and CD Roms, I call upon you to remember and recollect a line from the Dhammapada which as a good reader, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, you would have yourself read or heard some one else read it to you. I put it this way, with this emphasis, because I know of very many great westerners like the late Dr. Raphaelo M. Salas of the UN who quoted freely from the Dhammapada, even here in Sri Lanka in our midst. That was in August, 1979, and he quoted verse no. 336 of the Dhammapada. He quoted from the *Taṇhā Vagga* or the Chapter on Craving. The verse in question to-day is no. 241 of the *Malavagga*. My concern is line 2, but together with its line 1, the Pali reads as follows.

*Asajjhāya-malā mantā anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā*

The first line here makes sense with ease. It means: 'Lack of regular recital

or *asajjhāya* is disastrous to keeping mantras or hymns in memory'. Such a failing is called a *mala*. Our major concern is line 2 which reads *anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā*. Knowing some bit of Pali as we do at this age, to us the literal translation of this would be 'lack of resolve to do a thing would spell disaster to successful life in the home.' The trouble making word in question here is *anuṭṭhāna*. What we detect in this and would like to draw our listener's attention to is basically a translation error. We take serious note of such errors in Buddhist writings, not merely because we have been teachers of the Pali language all our life. All our life, we have also seen such unpardonable mistakes in translation leading to much more heinous mistakes of interpretation. The consequences of these have been disastrous. It is a recurrent warning in the Buddhist teachings that faulty handling of Pali texts leads to serious errors of interpretation. So we are adequately cautioned on these and are called upon to act wisely in such situations.

With this preliminary observation, let us now endeavour to understand correctly what is implied in the phrase *anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā*. The word *ghara* primarily means house, the place where one lives. It also comes to mean 'household life'. The word *uṭṭhāna*, meaning 'rising up' is formed by adding the prefix *ud-* which has the meaning 'up or upwards' to the root *thā* of the verb which gives us the form *tiṭṭhati* which means stands. Thus *uṭṭhāna* means rising up, or being ready for action. Therefore also enterprising. *Anuṭṭhāna* as the opposite of *uṭṭhāna* therefore means 'lacking in initiative' or 'being unenterprising'. It is not at all surprising that Buddhist thinking looks upon this 'lack of initiative' as the greatest disaster in household living, as the greatest calamity that can befall a family. Instead of this brave challenging attitude, the Buddhists over the years, have been misguided to look upon the ill-effects of stars like *Senasuru Apale* to explain household calamities like accidents and deaths, losses and economic disasters. It is now time for the Sri Lankans to look for the origin of such rot elsewhere. The concept of *uṭṭhāna* is at a very high premium in Buddhist lay life. It is a man with *uṭṭhāna* or the man who is *uṭṭhātā*

who is going to be a wealthy man in society. Therefore it says *Uṭṭhātā vindate dhanam*. It certainly is not the man who places the big *pūjā vaṭṭiya* before the god. It has to be equally so in the life of a *pabbajita*.

It is tragic to note that this vibrant and dynamic aspect of social thinking in Buddhism is now seen to be going by default. As far as Buddhism is concerned it has now, after full fifty years of independence, come to be the age in which the devil is quoting the scriptures. The Devil not only quotes in Pali or even in inscriptional Sinhala, but gives his own English renderings, unmindful of or deliberately distorting the internationally accepted standard translations. As far as these incorrect and willfully distorted translations go, after years of sober and dispassionate judgement, we have now come to the conclusion that no matter what those above and below, in the Sasana or outside the Sasana have to say, we would feel criminally unfair by our Lord and our Master, the Buddha, if we do not, with the necessary courage and honesty, point out these to the public who have a need to benefit by these. As the Jataka stories often describe, are we to allow Buddhist teachings to be reduced to the level of beautiful lotus ponds which are taken possession of by man-eating demons, thereby making them dreadful and getting them out of the reach of people.

Therefore let us sit in judgement as judges who can bring out their own honest judgements on these vital issues of Buddhist teachings and their interpretations. Where we feel we cannot do justice, let us be brave enough to refer these to bodies of international jurists. We have definite proof that we have succeeded in numerous cases where we have detected such errors and attempted corrections.

In the case of our Dhammapada verses, what we refer to as the tradition of the Commentary, has in a large number of instances deflected the spirit of our vibrant early Buddhist teachings. The best example of such a glaring howler is in verse no. 157 [Ch. XII. verse no.1]. A wise person is called upon to be vigilant and keep watch over himself or herself at least during one of the three watches of the night. The Pali of this clearly reads *tiṅṇaṃ aññataram yāmaṃ paṭijaggeyya*

*paṇḍito*. Any honest student of Pali knows that the word *yāma* refers to the three fold division of the night as in *tiyāma-ratti*. The phrase *tiṇṇam aññataraṃ yāmaṃ* means one out of the three watches of the night. This dynamic and vibrant daily watchfulness, to be undertaken during each night by every wise one, is more than hilariously reduced to the accumulation of merit during any one of the stages of life, like childhood, adolescence or old age. In most cases, Sri Lankan translators, both past and present, have given into the Commentarial tradition. Western translators are seen wavering between the two. Sometimes they are right and sometimes they are wrong, depending on their choice. We are glad to note that today there are at least some Sri Lankan monk translators who correct themselves and are moving away from the Commentarial tradition.

As for this controversial line *anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā*, translators both eastern and western who incline to take the Commentarial tradition, have their translations approximating to 'non-repair is the bane of houses '. Here are some such translations. 1. Non-repair is the spoiler of buildings. 2. Non-repair is the canker of a house. 3. For houses, nonmaintenance is corrosive. 4. The house neglected, soon decays. Near-accurate eastern and western translators have it as 1. Non-exertion is the impurity of house. 2. Non-exertion is the rust of homes. 3. Houses have the lethargy of inmates as their rust As far as we can see, it requires a great deal of wishful thinking to pack this meaning of 'non-repair of houses' into the word *anuṭṭhāna*. It gets hardly any linguistic support.

This shift of accent, and here we would say a very unwarranted one, in the body of Buddhist teachings, from a correction and stimulation of psycho-ethical aspects of human life to one of very mundane and grossly material things like repair and maintenance of houses and buildings is hardly acceptable. This is both not to know and to deliberately turn one's back upon the very Buddhistic down to earth development of human life as a solid basis for higher spiritual growth. We have already expressed the idea that the value of *utthāna* as a lever in upgrading the spiritual caliber of a Buddhist aspirant cannot be overrated. How then can we disregard, or not heed with adequate sense of danger, the down

grading or the utter confusion of a concept like *uṭṭhāna*? Elsewhere in Buddhist texts, this same spirit is breathed out in concepts like *ārabba-dhātu* or in verbs like *ārabhatha* in phrases like *ārabhatha nikkhamatha yuñjatha buddhasāsane*.

Here is another example of this same concept of *uṭṭhāna* being seriously misunderstood, once again in the Dhammapada, at verse no. 168 [Ch. XIII. Loka Vagga]. The Commentary here again is responsible for this serious deflection. Let us take a careful look at the verse.

*Uttiṭṭhe nappamajjeyya dhammaṃ sucariṭaṃ care*

We are fundamentally concerned with the first two words of the line quoted above. They are 1. *uttiṭṭhe* and 2. *nappamajjeyya*. To us they are both pure verb forms, both being used in the Potential mood, third person singular, implying the sense of should or would. Therefore *uttiṭṭhe* would mean 'should rise up'. In the same way *na pamajjeyya* would mean 'one should not delay or be neglectful'. This we discover time and again to be a regular Buddhist injunction requiring physical alertness [*uttiṭṭhe*] and economy of time utilization [*na pamajjeyya*]. Equipped with this, the second line *dhammaṃ sucariṭaṃ care* requires one to live the dhamma perfectly well. It is an over all requirement for every Buddhist that he lives his life in the world in accordance with the dhamma. It is assured that one shall be happy thereby. *Dhammacārī sukhaṃ seti*. Both in this world and the world to come: *asmiṃ loke paramhi ca*.

Apparently on the assumption that the above verse of the Dhammapada is of special relevance to monastic living, the Commentary takes *uttiṭṭhe* to refer begged food or *piṇḍapāta* and renders it very narrowly as 'with regard to begged food while being on the monk's alms round'. To us the main theme of this verse is 'living the dhamma', i.e. *dhammaṃ sucariṭaṃ care* and the two preceding words *uttiṭṭhe* and *na pamajjeyya* serve as prerequisites for the same. We should not fail here to notice that in many places in Buddhist teachings *uttiṭṭha* and *appamāda* go hand in hand. With us they are more or less inseparable cognate virtues. At verse no. 25 we have *uṭṭhāna* and *appamāda* coupled with *samyama*

and *dama*. All these together are said to contribute to the building up of an unassailable island of security from which a wise man would not be torn off.

Unlike in the case of *anuṭṭhāna-malā gharā* which we have discussed above as leading to a good deal of conflicting interpretations, most translators are not inclined to accept the Commentarial view on *uttiṭṭhe na pamajjeyya*. They take this as an injunction for all, monk and layman, and offer their translations as 'be physically alert and mindful of time'.

On the whole, Buddhists know very well the worth of these two virtues of *uṭṭhāna* and *appamāda*. Heading a list of four items which contribute to the success of a householder's life, *uṭṭhānasampadā* is defined, irrespective of the profession to which one belongs, as being clever [*dakkho*], not lazy [*analo*], endowed with wise judgement [*tatrūpāyāya vīmamsāya samannāgato*] and gifted with administrative ability [*alam kātuṃ alam samvidhātuṃ* A.IV.281]. The Dhammapada has a whole chapter of 12 verses dealing with *appamāda* [Ch.2. Appamāda Vagga]. *Appamāda* may best be defined as skillful management of time. Those who waste time are said to grieve in hell in their life after: *Khaṇatītā hi socanti nirayamhi samappitā*.

A very serious warning given to men and women in Buddhism is 'Let not time over take you' or *Khaṇo ve mā upaccagā*. Fortune dodges him who keeps looking out for auspicious moments or it says thus in Pali *Nakkhattaṃ paṭimānentaṃ attho bālaṃ upaccagā*. It insists further that auspiciousness lies in the successful performance of a task and not on the time point of an asterism. It is asked, with a ring of ridicule 'What can the stars do?': *Kim karissanti tārakā?*

Our admonition to you on this Poya day, a day on which all of you who go under the designation of Buddhists, must seriously reset your thinking machines, is to prompt you to question anew your present patterns of thinking and re-examine the lines of action you have adopted in life. We are quite certain that what you presently pursue, both as thought and as action are not what you have chosen and accepted. It is more in the category of a heritage, a heritage about

whose origin you are not even vaguely aware. It may be a heritage from a demonic primitive past of this country itself. It may be harmlessly and yet meaninglessly assimilated into our higher strands of culture. Offerings of food and drink, including even a sip of alcohol in the case of a male deceased, materially left on the seventh day after the death for the consumption of the dead, are typical examples of such despicable vulgar practices wrapped up in gold and silver paper. Some of us, in the name elitism, adopt such practices even today.

Some others are trendy importations from outside the country, near and far, without a serious awareness of their genesis or their identity. Their corrosiveness on one's own cultural heritage is not even reckoned with. They make us forget our human worth, our self-help capacity and therefore the need for self-discipline and self-correction. They enslave us to merely believed-in external props. They indeed eat into us like a cancer, but their believed in social escalation and the assumed and imagined material uplift they are said to confer upon the practitioners, make people forget and be oblivious to their drugging effect. If in our country we need anything like a Bhāvanā Consciousness, for this century or the next, it really is in terms of the need to reset our consciousness or our thinking mould, by whatever name you call it, so that we may not be out of step for the things that are coming our way, whether they be the morals and manners of men and women, the things we eat and drink or our attitudes to the world we live in, including all life within it, human, animal and plant.

May all beings be well and happy. Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā.